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Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's 'Thriller'*

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Michael Jackson, Megastar. His LP, *Thriller*, made in 1982, has sold over 35 million copies worldwide and is said to be the biggest selling LP in the history of pop. Jackson is reputed to have amassed a personal fortune of some 75 million dollars at the age of 26. Even more remarkably, he's been a star since he was 11 and sang lead with his brothers in the Jackson Five, the biggest selling group on the Tamla Motown label in the 1970s. The Jackson Five practically invented the genre of 'teeny-bopper' pop cashed in upon by white pop idols like Donny Osmond. While such figures have faded from memory, classic Jackson Five tunes like 'I Want You Back' and 'ABC' can still evoke the pride and enthusiasm which marked the assertive mood of the 'Black Pride' cultural movement.

After he and his brothers left Motown in the mid-1970s and took more artistic control over their own productions, Jackson developed as a singer, writer and stage performer. His *Off The Wall* LP of 1979, which established him as a solo star, demonstrates the lithe, sensual texture of his voice and its mastery over a diverse range of musical styles and idioms, from romantic ballad to rock. Just what is it that makes this young, black man so different, so appealing?

Undoubtedly, it is the voice which lies at the heart of his appeal. Rooted in the Afro-American tradition of 'soul', Jackson's vocal performance is characterised by breathy gasps, squeaks, sensual sighs and other wordless sounds which have become his stylistic signature. The way in which this style punctuates the emotional

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resonance and bodily sensuality of the music corresponds to what Roland Barthes called the 'grain' of the voice – 'the grain is the body in the voice as it sings'.[1] The emotional and erotic expressiveness of the voice is complemented by the sensual grace and sheer excitement of Jackson's dancing style: even as a child, his stage performance provoked comparisons with James Brown and Jackie Wilson.

But there is another element to Jackson's success and popularity – his image. Jackson's individual style fascinates and attracts attention. The ankle-cut jeans, the single-gloved hand and, above all, the wet-look hairstyle which have become his trademarks, have influenced the sartorial repertoires of black and white youth cultures and been incorporated into mainstream fashion.

Most striking is the change in Jackson's looks and physical appearance as he has grown. The cute child dressed in gaudy flower-power gear and sporting a huge 'Afro' hairstyle has become, as a young adult, a paragon of racial and sexual ambiguity. Michael reclines across the gatefold sleeve of the *Thriller* LP, dressed in crisp black and white on a glossy metallic surface against a demure pink background. Look closer – the glossy sheen of his complexion appears lighter in colour than before; the nose seems sharper, more aqualine, less rounded and 'African' and the lips seem tighter, less pronounced. Above all, the large 'Afro' has dissolved into a shock of wet-look permed curls and a new stylistic trademark, the single lock over the forehead, appears.

What makes this reconstruction of Jackson's image more intriguing is the mythology built up around it, in which it is impossible or simply beside the point to distinguish truth from falsehood. It is said that he has undergone cosmetic surgery to adopt a more white, European look, although Jackson denies it.[2] But the definite sense of racial ambiguity writ large in his new image is at the same time, and by the same token, the site of a sexual ambiguity bordering on androgyny. He may sing as sweet as Al Green, dance as hard as James Brown, but he looks more like Diana Ross than any black male soul artist. The media have seized upon these ambiguities and have fabricated a 'persona', a private 'self' behind the image, which has become the subject of speculation and rumour. This mythologisation has culminated in the construction of a Peter Pan figure. We are told that behind the star's image is

a lonely, 'lost boy', whose life is shadowed by morbid obsessions and anxieties. He lives like a recluse and is said to 'come alive' only when he is on stage in front of his fans. The media's exploitation of public fascination with Jackson the celebrity has even reached the point of 'pathologising' his personality:

> Even Michael Jackson's millions of fans find his lifestyle strange.
> It's just like one of his hit songs, Off The Wall. People in the know say –
> His biggest thrill is taking trips to Disneyland.
> His closest friends are zoo animals.
> He talks to tailor's dummies in his lounge.
> He fasts every Sunday and then dances in his bedroom until he drops of exhaustion. So showbusiness folk keep asking the question: 'Is Jacko Wacko?'
> Two top American psychiatrists have spent hours examining a detailed dossier on Jackson. Here is their on-the-couch report.[3]

Jackson's sexuality and sexual preference in particular have been the focus for such public fascination, as a business associate of his, Shirley Brooks, complains:

> He doesn't and won't make public statements about his sex life, because he believes – and he is right – that is none of anyone else's business. Michael and I had a long conversation about it, and he felt that anytime you're in the public eye and don't talk to the press, they tend to make up these rumours to fill their pages.[4]

Neither child nor man, not clearly either black or white and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine, Jackson's star-image is a 'social hieroglyph', as Marx said of the commodity form which demands, yet defies, decoding. This article offers a reading of the music video *Thriller* from the point of view of the questions raised by the phenomenal popularity of this star, whose image is a spectacle of racial and sexual indeterminacy.

Remake, remodel: video in the marketing of 'Thriller'

In recent years the 'new', hybrid medium of music video has come to occupy a central importance in the sale and significance of pop music. As 'adverts' to promote records, pop videos are now prerequisites to break singles into the charts. As industrial product, the medium – institutionalised in America's cable network MTV, owned by Warner Communications and American Express – has revitalised the economic profitability of pop by capitalising on new patterns of consumption created by the use, on a mass scale, of video technology.[5] From its inception, however MTV maintained an unspoken policy of excluding black artists. Jackson's videos for singles from the *Thriller* LP were the first to penetrate this racial boundary.

The videos for two songs from that LP, 'Billy Jean' and 'Beat It', stand out in the way they foreground Jackson's new style. 'Billy Jean', directed by Steve Barron, visualises the 'cinematic' feel of the music track and its narrative of a false paternity claim, by creating through a 'studio-set' scenario, sharp editing and various effects an ambience that complements rather than illustrates the song. Taking its cue from the LP cover, it stresses Jackson's style in his dress and in his dance. Paving stones light up as Jackson twists, kicks and turns through the performance, invoking the 'magic' of the star. 'Beat It', directed by Bob Giraldi (who made TV adverts for MacDonald's hamburgers and Dr Pepper soft drinks) visualises the anti-macho lyric of the song. Shots alternate between 'juvenile delinquent' gangs about to begin a fight, and Michael, fragile and alone in his bedroom. The singer then disarms the gangs with superior charm and grace as he leads the all-male cast through a dance sequence that synthesises the cinematic imagery of *The Warriors* and *West Side Story*.

These videos, executed from designs by Jackson himself, and others in which he appears such as 'Say, Say, Say' by Paul McCartney and 'Can You Feel It' by The Jacksons, are important aspects of the commercial success of *Thriller* because they breached the boundaries of race on which the music industry has been based. Unlike stars such as Lionel Richie, Jackson has not 'crossed over' from black to white stations to end up in the middle of the road: his success has popularised black music in white rock and pop markets, by actually playing with imagery and style which have always been central to the marketing of pop. In so doing,

Jackson has opened up a space in which new stars like Prince are operating, at the interface between the boundaries defined by 'race'.

'Thriller', the LP title track, was released as the third single from the album. The accompanying video went beyond the then-established conventions and limitations of the medium. According to Dave Laing, these conventions have been tied to the economic imperative of music video:

> first, the visuals were subordinated to the soundtrack, which they were there to sell; second, music video as a medium for marketing immediately inherited an aesthetic and a set of techniques from the pre-existing and highly developed form of television commercials.[6]

Thus one convention, that of fast-editing derived from the montage codes of TV advertising, has been overlaid with another: that of an alternation between naturalistic or 'realist' modes of representation (in which the song is performed 'live' or in a studio and mimed to by the singer or group), and 'constructed' or fantastic modes of representation (in which the singer/group acts out imaginary roles implied by the lyrics or by the 'atmosphere' of the music). 'Thriller' incorporates the montage and alternation conventions, but organises the flow of images by framing it with a powerful *story-telling* or *narrational* direction which provides continuity and closure. Since 'Thriller', this story-telling code has itself become a music video convention: director Julien Temple's 'Undercover of the Night' (Rolling Stones, 1983) and 'Jazzin' for Blue Jean' (David Bowie, 1984) represent two of the more imaginative examples of this narrativisation of the music by the direction of the flow of images. 'Thriller' is distinguished not only by its internal and formal structure, but also by the fact that it is 'detached' from a primary economic imperative or rationale. The LP was already a 'monster' of a commercial success before the title track was released as a single: there was no need for a 'hard sell'. Thus the 'Thriller' video does not so much seek to promote the record as a primary product, but rather *celebrates the success the LP has brought Michael Jackson* by acting as a vehicle to showcase its star. In the absence of a direct economic imperative, the video can indulge Jackson's own interest in acting: its use of

cinematic codes and structures provides a framework for Jackson to act as a 'movie-star'. Jackson himself had acted before, in *The Wiz* (1977), an all-black remake of *The Wizard of Oz* in which he played the Scarecrow. He professes a deep fascination with acting:

> I love it so much. It's escape. It's fun. It's just neat to become another thing, another person. Especially when you really believe it and it's not like you're acting. I always hated the word 'acting' – to say, 'I am an actor'. It should be more than that. It should be more like a believer.[7]

In 'Thriller', Jackson acts out a variety of roles as the video engages in a playful parody of the stereotypes, codes and conventions of the 'horror' genre. The inter-textual dialogues between film, dance and music which the video articulates also draw us, the spectators, into the *play* of signs and meanings at work in the 'constructedness' of the star's image. The following reading of the music video considers the specificity of the music track, asks how the video 'visualises' the music and then goes on to examine the internal structure of the video as an inter-text of sound, image and style.

'Thriller': a reading

Consider first the specificity of the music track. The title, which gives the LP its title as well, is the name for a particular genre of film – the 'murder-mystery-suspense' film, the detective story, the thriller. But the lyrics of the song are not 'about' film or cinema. The track is a mid-tempo funk number, written by Rod Temperton, and recalls similar numbers written by the author for Michael Jackson such as 'Off the Wall'. The lyrics evoke allusions and references to the cinematic culture of 'terror' and 'horror' movies but only to play on the meaning of the word 'thriller'. The lyrics weave a little story, which could be summarised as 'a night of viewing some . . . gruesome horror movies with a lady friend'.[8] The lyrics narrate such a fictional-scene by speaking in the first person:

> It's close to midnight and somethin' evil's lurkin' in the

> dark / . . . . You try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it / You start to freeze, as horror looks you right between the eyes / You're paralysed.

Who is this 'you' being addressed? The answer comes in the semantic turn-around of the third verse and chorus in which the pun on the title is made evident:

> Now is the time for you and I to cuddle close together / All thru' the night, I'll save you from the terror on the screen / I'll make you see, that [Chorus] This is thriller, thriller-night, 'cause I could thrill you more than any ghost would dare to try / Girl, this is thriller . . . so let me hold you tight and share a killer, thriller tonight'.[9]

Thus the lyrics play a *double-entendre* on the meaning of 'thrill'. As Iain Chambers has observed,

> Distilled into the metalanguage of soul and into the clandestine cultural liberation of soul music is the regular employment of a sexual discourse.[10]

Along with the emotional complexities of intimate relationships, physical sexuality is perhaps *the* central preoccupation of the soul tradition. But, as Chambers suggests, the power of soul as a cultural form to express sexuality does not so much lie in the literal meanings of the words but in the passion of the singer's voice and vocal performance. The explicit meanings of the lyrics are in this sense secondary to the sensual resonance of the individual character of the voice, its 'grain'. While the 'grain' of the voice encodes the contradictions of sexual relationships, their pleasures and pain, the insistence of the rhythm is an open invitation to the body to dance. Dance, as cultural form, and sexual ritual, is a mode of decoding the sound and meaning articulated in the music. In its incitement of the listener to dance, to become an active participant in the texture of voice, words and rhythm, soul music is not only 'about' sexuality, but is itself a musical means for the eroticisation of the body.[11] In 'Thriller' it is the 'grain' of Jackson's voice that expresses and plays with this sexual sub-text and it is this dimension that transgresses the denotation of the lyrics and escapes analytic

reduction. Jackson's interpretation of Temperton's lyric inflects the allusions to cinema to thematise a discourse on sexuality, rather than film, and the 'story' created by the lyrics sets up a reverberation between two semantic poles: the invocation of macabre movies is offset by the call to 'cuddle close together'.

The element of irony set in motion by this semantic polarity is the 'literary' aspect of the sense of parody that pervades the song. Special sound effects – creaking doors and howling dogs – contribute to the pun on the title. Above all, this play of parody spreads out in Vincent Price's rap, which closes the record. The idea of a well-established white movie actor like Price delivering a 'rap', a distinctly black urban cultural form, is funny enough. But the fruity, gurgling tones of the actor's voice, which immediately invoke the semi-comic self-parody of 'horror' he has become, express the affectionate sense of humour that underpins the song:

> Darkness falls across the land. The midnight hour is close at hand. Creatures crawl in search of blood, to terrorise y'awl's neighbourhood. And whosoever shall be found, without the soul for getting down, must stand and face the hounds of hell, and rot inside a corpse's shell.

The parody at play here lies in the quotation of soul argot – 'get down', 'midnight hour', 'funk of forty thousand years' – in the completely different context of horror movies. The almost camp quality of refined exaggeration in Price's voice and his 'British' accent is at striking odds with the discourse of black American soul music.

As we 'listen' to the production of meanings in the music track the various 'voices' involved in the production (Temperton, Jackson, Price, Quincy Jones, etc.) are audibly combined into parody. One way of approaching the transition from music to video, then, would be to suggest that John Landis, its director, brings aspects of his own 'voice' as an 'author' of Hollywood films into this dialogue. It seems to me that Landis's voice contributes to the puns and play on the meaning of 'thriller' by drawing on conventions of mainstream horror movies.

Story, plot and parody

Landis introduces two important elements from film into the medium of music video: a narrative direction of the flow of images and special-effects techniques associated with the pleasures of the horror film. These effects are used in the two scenes that show the metamorphosis of Michael into, first, a werewolf, and then a zombie. The use of these cinematic technologies to create the metamorphoses is clearly what distinguishes 'Thriller' from other music video. 'Thriller' gives the video audience *real thrills* – the 'thrill' of tension, anxiety and fear associated with the pleasure offered by the horror genre. The spectacle of the visceral transformation of cute, lovable Michael Jackson into a howlin' wolf of a monster is disturbing, because it seems so convincing, 'real' and fascinating. As Philip Brophy remarks,

> The pleasure of the (horror) text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you – and loving it: an exchange mediated by adrenalin.[12]

Both special effects and narrative return us to the direction of John Landis, who also directed *An American Werewolf in London* (1979). *American Werewolf* is a horror comedy; it retells the traditional werewolf myth, setting its protagonists as tourists in England attacked by a strange animal, into which one of them then turns during the full moon. The film employs pop tunes to exacerbate its underlying parody of this mythology – 'Moondance' (Van Morrison), 'Bad Moon Rising' (Creedence Clearwater Revival) and 'Blue Moon' (Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers). And this humour is combined with special-effects and make-up techniques which show the bodily metamorphosis of man to wolf in 'real time', as opposed to less credible 'time-lapse' techniques. The 'Thriller' video not only refers to this film, but to other generic predecessors, including *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) by George Romero and *Halloween* (1978) by John Carpenter. Indeed, the video is strewn with allusions to horror films. As Brophy observes:

> It is a genre which mimics itself mercilessly – because its statement is coded in its very mimicry . . . It is not so much that the modern horror film refutes or ignores the conventions of

> genre, but it is involved in a violent awareness of itself as a saturated genre.[13]

Thus cinematic horror seems impelled towards parody of its own codes and conventions.[14] With hindsight it is tempting to suggest that 'Thriller's' music track was almost made to be filmed, as it seems to cue these cinematic references. Certain points within the video appear to be straightforward transpositions from the song: 'They're out to get you, there's demons closin' in on ev'ry side / . . . Night creatures call and the dead start to walk in their masquerade', and so on. But it is at the level of its *narrative structure* that the video engages in an inter-textual dialogue with the music track. The following synopsis aims to outline this structure:

> The video opens with a car driving through woods at night. The engine cuts out and a teenage couple, 'Michael' (played by Michael Jackson) and an unnamed girl (played by Ola Ray), get out of the car and walk. Michael tells the delighted girl that he would like to be her boyfriend, but then confesses that he is 'different from other guys'. The girl's puzzled look turns into terror as Michael undergoes a metamorphosis into a werewolf. She flees and a chase ensues culminating in Michael as monster pouncing on the girl.
>
> The scene then shifts to Michael and the girl as a couple in a cinema audience, watching (by implication) what we have just seen. The girl becomes frightened and leaves. Michael is enthralled and remains seated but then gets up to join her in the foyer. As they walk away from the cinema the music track fades up and he begins to sing, darting around the girl as they walk.
>
> After the first two verses Vincent Price's rap comes on to the soundtrack as corpses rise from a graveyard and shuffle onto the street. Michael and the girl return into frame, to be encircled by the ghouls. The music track fades down and the girl turns to Michael to find him transformed into a zombie. Michael leads the Living Dead through a dance sequence, accompanied by the music track, culminating in the chorus (in which Michael returns to normal). The music fades down again and the girl flees to a deserted house, pursued by the zombies who violently break into the room in which she is hiding. Led by Michael as zombie, they close in on her.

As the girl screams, Michael is revealed as her boyfriend. He calms her and offers to take her home. As they exit, Michael turns to camera to show two yellow eyes and Vincent Price's laugh is heard.[15]

Unlike most pop videos, 'Thriller' does not begin with the first notes of the song, but with a long panning shot and the 'cinematic' sound of recorded silence. This master-shot, establishing the all-seeing but invisible 'eye' of the camera, is comparable to the discursive function of third-person narration. The shot/reverse-shot series which frames the dialogue between the two protagonists in the opening sequence establishes 'point-of-view' camera angles, analogues to 'subjective', first-person modes of enunciation. It is the use of these specific cinematic codes of narration that structures the entire flow of images and gives the video a beginning, a middle and an end. 'Thriller' incorporates the pop video convention of switching from 'realist' to 'fantastic' modes of representation, but binds this into continuity and closure through its narrative. The two metamorphosis sequences are of crucial importance to this narrative structure; the first disrupts the 'equilibrium' of the opening sequence, and the second repeats but differs from the first in order to bring the flow of images to its end and re-establish equilibrium. Within the story-telling conventions of the horror genre the very appearance of the monster/werewolf/vampire/alien signals the violation of equilibrium: the presence of the monster activates the narrative dynamic whose goal or end is achieved by an act of counter-violence that eliminates it.[16]

In the opening sequence of 'Thriller' equilibrium is established and then disrupted.

LS/Pan	**Large 1950s-looking car drives slowly along the road through woods at night.**
MCU/shot-reverse shot	**Michael (M) and girl (G) in front seats of the car, framed in profile. As car stops G looks at M in disbelief. M looks back and smiles to himself, laughs: 'Honestly, we're out of gas.' G turns her head coquettishly: 'So what are we going to do now?'. M smiles.**
MS/shot-reverse shot	**M and G walk side by side, camera gradually tilts from ground to eye level.**

G hangs onto M's arm: 'I'm sorry I didn't believe you.' M stops and turns to face G: 'Can I ask you something? . . . You know I like you, don't you?' ('Yes.') . . . And I hope you like me the way I like you . . . ('Yes.') . . . I was wondering if you would be my girl?' G cries out 'Michael!' and rushes to embrace him. M proffers a ring and places it on her finger. She looks at it, gleaming. G: 'Its beautiful!' M: 'Now it's official . . . I have something I want to tell you.' M's facial expression changes and 'creepy clarinets' fade up on the music score. G: 'Yes, Michael?' M: 'I'm not like other guys', G: 'Of course not, that's why I love you.' M: 'No, I mean I'm different.' G: 'What are you talking about?'.

The music score swirls up in volume and the shot-reverse shot series is broken by an insert of clouds across a full moon. G looks at M with a puzzled expression. M holds his stomach and contorts his face, letting out gasps and squeaks. G: 'Michael, are you all right?' M raises his head to reveal two yellow eyes: 'Go away' he/it cries. G screams in terror. Metamorphosis I.

The dialogue and exchange of glances between Michael and the girl as the male and female protagonists of the story establish 'romance' as the narrative pre-text. The girl's look at Michael as the car stops hints at a question, answered by the expression of bemused incredulity on his face. Did he stop the car on purpose? Was it a romantic ruse, to lure her into a trap? The girl's coquettish response to Michael's defence ('Honestly, we're out of gas') lingers sensually on the syllables, '*So* . . . what are we going to do now?' Her question, and his smile in return, hint at and exacerbate the underlying erotic tension of romantic intrigue between the two characters. Michael's dialogue gives a minimal 'character' to his role as the boyfriend: he appears a somewhat shy, very proper

and polite 'boy next door'. The girl, on the other hand, is not so much a 'character' as the 'girlfriend' type. At another level, their clothes – a pastiche 1950s retro style – connote youthful innocence, the couple as archetypical teen lovers. But this innocent representation is unsettled by Michael's statement: 'I'm not like other guys.' The statement implies a question posed on the terrain of gender, and masculinity in particular: why is he different from 'other guys'?

The sequence provides an answer in the boyfriend's transformation into a monster. But, although the metamorphosis resolves the question, it is at the cost of disrupting the equilibrium of 'romance' between the two protagonists, which is now converted into a relation of terror between monster and victim. The chase through the woods is the final sequence of this 'beginning' of the narrative. The subsequent scene, returning to Michael and the girl as a couple in a cinema, re-establishes the equation of 'romance' and repositions the protagonists as girlfriend and boyfriend, but at another level of representation.

MS	**M and G in third row of cinema. Audience screams. G, looking with horror at the screen, clings to M.**
CU	**G hugs M, who stares at the screen chewing popcorn and laughing.**
LS	**Audience screams.**
CU	**G turns her head away and steals a look back at the screen. Voices off-frame, from the screen – 'Sheriff, he's over here. God, look at that thing!' (gun-shot) 'Look out!' G: 'Can we get out of here?'**
CU	**M: 'No, I'm enjoying this'. Continues grinning at the screen.**
CU	**'Well . . . I can't watch.'**
MCU	**G gets up to leave, exits right.**
CU	**M continues grinning, munching and staring at the screen. Voices off-frame, from the screen: '. . . scrawled in blood . . . What does it say? . . . See you next Wednesday.' Screams from cinema audience.**

MS	**M gets up and exits right.**
LS	**Panning shot from high angle moving downwards revealing the words 'Palace Cinema' with 'Vincent Price/Thriller' on marquee. Music track fades up. Camera gradually frames cinema facade.**
LS	**G walks out of the cinema; M runs after her – both framed by the title 'Thriller' on awnings. M: 'It's only a movie' (laughing).**
MCU	**G: 'It's not funny.' M: 'You were scared, weren't you?' G: 'I wasn't that scared'. M: 'Naw . . . you were scared'. M laughs. G turns and exits right. M follows. Beginning of song-sequence.**

In structural terms this shift in modes of representation, from a fantastic level (in which the metamorphosis and chase take place) to a realist level (in which the song is performed) is important because it retrospectively implies that the entire opening sequence was a film within a film, or rather, a film within the video. More to the point, the 'beginning' is thus revealed to be *a parody of 1950s B-movie horror*. This has been signalled in the self-conscious 'acting' mannerisms Jackson employs and by the pastiche of 1950s teenager styles. The shift from a parody of a 1950s horror movie to the cinema audience watching the film and the long shot of the cinema showing the film, visually acknowledge this 'violent awareness of itself as saturated genre'.

> While Hammer were reviving the Universal monsters . . . American International Pictures began a cycle whose appreciation was almost entirely tongue-in-cheek – a perfect example of 'camp' manufacture and reception of the iconography of terror.
>
> The first film in this series bore the (now notorious) title *I Was A Teenage Werewolf* (1957). . . . The absurdity of the plot and acting, and the relentless pop music that filled the soundtrack, gave various kinds of pleasure to young audiences and encouraged the film-makers to follow this pilot movie with *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* and with *Teenage Monster* and

Teenage Zombie creations that were as awful to listen to as they were to see.[17]

Parody depends on an explicit self-consciousness: in 'Thriller' this informs the dialogue, dress-style and acting in the opening sequence. In its parody of a parody it also acknowledges that there is no 'plot' as such: the narrative code that structures the video has no story to tell. Rather it creates a simulacrum of a story, a parody of a story, in its stylistic send-up of genre conventions. But it is precisely at the level of its self-consciousness that 'Thriller's' mimicry of the *gender roles* of the horror genre provides an anchor for the way it visualises the sexual discourse, the play on the meaning of the word 'thriller' on the music track.

Genre and gender: 'Thriller's' sexual subtext

As the video switches from fantastic to realist modes of representation, the roles played by the two protagonists shift accordingly. The fictional film within the video, with its narrative pretext of 'romance', positions Michael and the girl as boyfriend and girlfriend, and within this the fantastic metamorphosis transforms the relation into one of terror between monster and victim. If we go back to Michael's statement made in this scene, 'I'm not like other guys', we can detect a confusion about the role he is playing.

The girl's initial reply, 'Of course not. That's why I love you', implies that it is obvious that he is 'different' because he is the real Michael Jackson. When, in her pleasure at his proposal, she calls him by his proper name she interpellates him in two roles at once – as fictional boyfriend and real superstar. This ambiguity of reference acknowledges Jackson's self-conscious acting style: we, the video audience, get the impression he is playing at playing a role and we 'know' that Jackson, the singer, the star, is playing at the role of a 'movie-star'. In 'Thriller', Michael's outfit and its stylistic features – the wet-look hairstyle, the ankle-cut jeans and the letter 'M' emblazoned on his jacket – reinforce this meta-textual superimposition of roles. If Michael, as the male protagonist, is both boyfriend and star, his female counterpart in the equation of 'romance' is both the girlfriend and at this meta-textual level, the fan. The girl is in two places at once: on screen and in the audience.

As spectator of the film within the video she is horrified by the image on the screen and gets up to leave. 'Fooled' by the violent spectacle of the metamorphosis, she mistakes the fantastic for the real, she forgets that 'it's only a movie'. The girl's positions in the fictional and realist scenes mirror those of the video spectator – the effects which generate thrills for the audience are the events, in the story-world, that generate terror for the girl.

The girl occupies a mediated position between the audience and the image which offers a clue to the way the video visualises the music track. In the middle section, as the couple walk away from the cinema and Michael begins the song, the narrative roles of boyfriend and girlfriend are re-established, but now subordinated to the song's performance. This continuity of narrative function is underlined by the differentiation of costume style: Michael now wears a flashy red and black leather jacket cut in a 'futuristic' style and her ensemble is also contemporary – t-shirt, bomber jacket and head of curls like Michael's own. This imagery echoes publicity images of Jackson the stage performer. As the song gets under way Jackson becomes 'himself', the star. The girl becomes the 'you' in the refrain 'Girl, I could thrill you more than any ghost would dare to try'.

On the music track, the 'you' could be the listener, since the personal and direct mode of enunciation creates a space for the listener to enter and take part in the production of meanings. In the video, it is the girl who takes this place and, as the addressee of the sexual discourse enunciated in the song, her positions in the video-text create possibilities for spectatorial identification. These lines of identification are hinted at in the opening scene in which the girl's response to Michael's wooing enacts the 'fantasy of being a pop star's girlfriend', a fantasy which is realised in this section of the video.[18]

Beauty and the beast-masks, monsters and masculinity

The conventions of horror inscribe a fascination with sexuality, with gender identity codified in terms that revolve around the symbolic presence of the monster. Women are invariably the victims of the acts of terror unleashed by the were-wolf/vampire/alien/'thing': the monster as non-human Other. The

destruction of the monster establishes male protagonists as heroes, whose object and prize is of course the woman. But as the predatory force against which the hero has to compete, the monster itself occupies a 'masculine' position in relation to the female victim.

'Thriller's' rhetoric of parody presupposes a degree of self-consciousness on the part of the spectator, giving rise to a supplementary commentary on the sexuality and sexual identity of its star, Michael Jackson. Thus, the warning 'I'm not like other guys' can be read by the audience as a reference to Jackson's sexuality. Inasmuch as the video audience is conscious of the gossip which circulates around the star, the statement of difference provokes other meanings: is he homosexual, transsexual or somehow presexual?

In the first metamorphosis Michael becomes a werewolf. As the recent *Company of Wolves* (directed by Neil Jordan, 1984) demonstrates, werewolf mythology – lycanthropy – concerns the representation of male sexuality as 'naturally' bestial, predatory, aggressive, violent – in a word, 'monstrous'. Like 'Thriller', *Company of Wolves* employs similar special effects to show the metamorphosis of man to wolf in 'real time'. And like the Angela Carter story on which it is based, the film can be read to rewrite the European folktale of 'Little Red Riding Hood' to reveal its concerns with subjects of menstruation, the moon and the nature of male sexuality. In the fictional opening scene of 'Thriller' the connotation of innocence around the girl likens her to Red Riding Hood. But is Michael a big, bad wolf?

In the culmination of the chase sequence through the woods, the girl takes the role of victim. Here, the disposition of point-of-view angles between the monster's dominant position and the supine position of the victim suggests rape, fusing the underlying sexual relation of 'romance' with terror and violence. As the monster, Michael's transformation might suggest that beneath the boy-next-door image there is a 'real' man waiting to break out, a man whose masculinity is measured by a rapacious sexual appetite, 'hungry like the wolf'. But such an interpretation is undermined and subverted by the final shot of the metamorphosis. Michael-as-werewolf lets out a blood-curdling howl, but this is in hilarious counterpoint to the collegiate 'M' on his jacket. What does it stand for? Michael? Monster? Macho Man? More like Mickey Mouse.

The incongruity between the manifest signifier and the symbolic meaning of the Monster opens up a gap in the text, to be filled with laughter.

Animals are regularly used to signify human attributes, with the wolf, lion, snake and eagle all understood as signs of male sexuality. Jackson's subversion of this symbolism is writ large on the *Thriller* LP cover. Across the star's knee lies a young tiger cub, a brilliant little metaphor for the ambiguity of Jackson's image as a black male pop star. This plays on the star's 'man-child' image and suggests a domesticated animality, hinting at menace beneath the cute and cuddly surface. Jackson's sexual ambiguity makes a mockery out of the menagerie of received images of masculinity.[19]

In the second metamorphosis Michael becomes a zombie. Less dramatic and 'horrifying' than the first, this transformation cues the spectacular dance sequence that frames the chorus of the song. While the dance, choreographed by Michael Peters, makes visual one of the lines from the lyric, 'Night creatures crawl and the dead start to walk in their masquerade', it foregrounds Jackson-the-dancer and his performance breaks loose from the video. As the ghouls begin to dance, the sequence elicits the same kind of parodic humour provoked by Vincent Price's rap on the music track. There humour lay in the incongruity between Price's voice and the argot of black soul culture. Here a visual equivalent of this incongruity is created by the spectacle of the living dead performing with Jackson a funky dance routine. The sense of parody is intensified by the macabre make-up of the ghouls, bile dripping from their mouths. Jackson's make-up, casting a ghostly pallor over his skin and emphasising the contour of the skull, alludes to one of the paradigmatic 'masks' of the horror genre, that of Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925).

Unlike the werewolf, the figure of the zombie, the undead corpse, does not represent sexuality so much as asexuality or anti-sexuality, suggesting the sense of *neutral eroticism* in Jackson's style as dancer. As has been observed:

> The movie star Michael most resembles is Fred Astaire – that *paragon of sexual vagueness.* Astaire never fit a type, hardly ever played a traditional romantic lead. He created his own niche by the sheer force of his tremendous talent.[20]

The dance sequence can be read as cryptic writing on this 'sexual

vagueness' of Jackson's body in movement, in counterpoint to the androgyny of his image. The dance breaks loose from the narrative and Michael's body comes alive in movement, a rave from the grave: the scene can thus be seen as a commentary on the notion that as star Jackson only 'comes alive' when he is on stage performing. The living dead invoke an existential liminality which corresponds to both the sexual indeterminacy of Jackson's dance and the somewhat morbid lifestyle that reportedly governs his offscreen existence. Both meanings are buried in the video 'cryptogram'.[21]

Metaphor-morphosis

Finally, I feel compelled to return to the scene of the first metamorphosis. It enthralls and captivates, luring the spectator's gaze and petrifying it in wonder. This sense of both fear and fascination is engineered by the video's special effects. By showing the metamorphosis in 'real time' the spectacle violently distorts the features of Jackson's face. The horror-effect of the monster's appearance depends on the 'suspension of disbelief': we know that the monster is a fiction, literally a mask created by mechanical techniques, but repress or disavow this knowledge to participate in the 'thrills', the pleasures expected from the horror-text. Yet in this splitting of belief which the horror film presupposes, it is credibility of the techniques themselves that is at stake in making the 'otherness' of the monster believable.[22]

The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller (1984) demonstrates the special effects used in the video. We see make-up artists in the process of applying the 'mask' that will give Jackson the appearance of the monster. Of particular interest is the make-up artists' explanation of how the werewolf mask was designed and constructed: a series of transparent cells, each with details of the animal features of the mask, are gradually superimposed on a publicity image of Jackson from the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. It is this superimposition of fantastic and real upon Jackson's face that offers clues as to why the metamorphosis is so effective. Like the opening parody of the 1950s horror movie and its confusion of roles that Jackson is playing (boyfriend/star), there is a slippage between different levels of belief on the part of the spectator.

The metamorphosis achieves a horrifying effect because the monster does not just mutilate the appearance of the boyfriend, but plays on the audience's awareness of Jackson's double role; thus, the credibility of the special effects violates the image of the star himself. At this meta-textual level, the drama of the transformation is heightened by other performance-signs that foreground Jackson as star. The squeaks, cries and other wordless sounds which emanate from his throat as he grips his stomach grotesquely mimic the sounds which are the stylistic trademark of Jackson's voice and thus reinforce the impression that it is the 'real' Michael Jackson undergoing this mutation. Above all, the very first shots of the video highlight the make-up on the star's face (particularly the eyes and lips), the pallor of his complexion, revealing the eerie sight of his skull beneath the wet-look curls. The very appearance of Jackson draws attention to the artificiality of his own image. As the monstrous mask is, literally, a construction made out of make-up and cosmetic 'work', the fictional world of the horror film merely appropriates what is already an artifice. I suggest that the metamorphosis be seen as *a metaphor for the aesthetic reconstruction of Michael Jackson's face.*

The literal construction of the fantastic monster-mask refers to other images of the star: the referent of the mask, as a sign in its own right, is a commonplace publicity image taken from the cover of a magazine. In this sense the mask refers not to the real person or private 'self' but to Michael Jackson-as-an-image. The metamorphosis could thus be seen as an accelerated allegory of the morphological development of Jackson's facial features: from child to adult, from boyfriend to monster, from star to superstar – the sense of wonder generated by the video's special effects forms an allegory for the fascination with which the world beholds this star-as-image.

In 1983, Jackson took part in a two-hour TV special to celebrate Motown's twenty-fifth anniversary, in which vintage footage was intercut with each act's performance; the film was then edited and used as a 'support' act on Motown artists' tours in England. This is how the reception of the film was described:

> The audience almost visibly tensed as Michael's voice . . . took complete control, attacking the songs with that increased repertoire of whoops, hiccups and gasps, with which he punctu-

> ates the lyric to such stylish, relaxing effect. And then he danced. The cocky strut of a super-confident child had been replaced by a lithe, menacing grace, and his impossibly lean frame, still boyishly gangly, when galvanised by the music, assumed a hypnotic, androgynous sexuality. Certainly, it was the first time in a long, long time I'd heard girls scream at a film screen.[23]

Amid all the screaming elicited by 'Thriller' it is possible to hear a parody of those fans' response. As a pop idol Michael Jackson has been the object of such screaming since he was eleven years old.

In 'The Face of Garbo' Barthes sought to explore the almost universal appeal of film stars like Chaplin, Hepburn and Garbo by describing their faces as *masks*: aesthetic surfaces on which a society writes large its own preoccupations.[24] Jackson's face can also be seen as such a mask, for his image has attracted and maintained the kind of cultural fascination that makes him more like a movie star than a modern rhythm and blues artist. The sexual and racial ambiguity of his image can be seen as pointing to a range of questions about images of sex and race in popular culture and popular music. If we regard his face, not as the manifestation of personality traits but as a surface of artistic and social inscription, the ambiguities of Jackson's image call into question received ideas about what black male artists in popular music should look like. Seen from this angle his experimentation with imagery represents a creative incursion upon a terrain in pop culture more visibly mapped out by white male stars like Mick Jagger, David Bowie and Boy George. At best, these stars have used androgyny and sexual ambiguity as part of their 'style' in ways which question prevailing definitions of male sexuality and sexual identity. Key songs on *Thriller* highlight this problematisation of masculinity: on 'Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'' the narrator replies to rumour and speculation about his sexuality, on 'Billy Jean' – a story about a fan who claims he is the father of her son – he refuses the paternal model of masculinity, and on 'Beat It' – 'Don't wanna see no blood, Don't be a macho man' – he explicitly refuses a bellicose model of manliness.

What makes Jackson's use of androgyny more compelling is that his work is located entirely in the Afro-American tradition of popular music and thus must be seen in the context of imagery of black men and black male sexuality. Jackson not only questions

dominant stereotypes of black masculinity,[25] but also gracefully steps outside the existing range of 'types' of black men. In so doing his style reminds us how some black men in the soul tradition such as Little Richard used 'camp', in the sense that Susan Sontag calls 'the love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration',[26] long before white pop stars began to exploit its 'shock-value'. Indeed, 'Thriller' is reminiscent of the 'camp' excesses of the originator of the combination of music and horror in pop culture, Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Horror imagery has fascinated the distinctly white male genre of 'heavy metal' in which acts like Alice Cooper and Ozzy Osbourne (Black Sabbath) consume themselves in self-parody. But like Hawkins, whose 'I Put a Spell on You' (1956) borrowed from images of horror to articulate a scream 'that found its way out of my big mouth *directly* through my heart and guts',[27] Jackson expresses another sort of 'screaming', one that articulates the erotic materiality of the human voice, its 'grain'. Writing about a musical tradition radically different from soul, Barthes coined this term to give 'the impossible account of an individual thrill that I constantly experience in listening to singing'.[28] 'Thriller' celebrates the fact that this thrill is shared by millions.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in Stephen Heath (ed.), *Image–Music–Text* (London: Fontana, 1977) p. 188.
2. Robert Johnson, 'The Michael Jackson Nobody Knows', *Ebony* (USA), December 1984.
3. *The Sun*, 9 April 1984.
4. Quoted in Nelson George, *The Michael Jackson Story* (London: New English Library, 1984) p. 106.
5. On music video, see Michael Boodro, 'Rock Videos: Another World', *ZG* ('Breakdown' issue) London 1984; Dessa Fox, 'The Video Virus', *New Musical Express*, London, 4 May 1985; Dave Laing, 'Music Video: Industrial Product – Cultural Form', *Screen*, March/April 1985, vol. 26, no. 2, and Andy Lipman, 'The World of Salvador Disney', *City Limits*, 24 May 1985.
6. Dave Laing, 'Music-Video', p. 81.
7. Quoted in Andy Warhol and Bob Colacello, 'Michael Jackson', *Interview* magazine, October 1982.
8. Nelson George, *Michael Jackson Story*, p. 108.

9. From *The Great Songs of Michael Jackson* (London: Wise Publications, 1984).
10. Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1985) p. 148.
11. Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms*, pp. 143–8 *passim*; see also, Richard Dyer, 'In Defence of Disco', *Gay Left*, no. 8, Summer 1979.
12. Philip Brophy, 'Horrality', reprinted in *Screen*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1988.
13. Ibid.
14. S. S. Prawer, *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror*, Oxford University Press, 1980.
15. The 'Thriller' video is generally available as part of *The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller*, Warner Home Video, 1984.
16. Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980) pp. 21, 56, 62.
17. Prawer, *Caligari's Children*, p. 15.
18. On personal modes of enunciation in pop discourse, see Alan Durant, *Conditions of Music* (London: Macmillan, 1984) esp. pp. 201–6. The 'fantasy of being a pop star's girlfriend' is examined in Dave Rimmer, *Like Punk Never Happened: Culture Club and the New Pop* (London: Faber, 1985) p. 112.
19. One of Freud's most famous patients, The Wolf Man, makes connections between animals and sexuality clear. The Wolf Man's dream also reads like a horror film: 'I dreamt that it was night and that I was lying on my bed. Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window.' Cf. Muriel Gardiner, *The Wolf Man and Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1973) p. 173. Freud's reading suggests that the terror in the dream manifests a fear of castration for a repressed homosexual desire.
20. Quoted in Nelson George, *Michael Jackson Story*, pp. 83–4.
21. The notion of 'cryptonymy' as a name for unconscious meanings emerges in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's re-reading of Freud's Wolf Man. See Peggy Kamuf, 'Abraham's Wake', *Diacritics*, Spring 1979, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 32–43.
22. Stephen Neale, *Genre*, p. 45.
23. Geoff Brown, *Michael Jackson: Body and Soul* (London: Virgin Books, 1984) p. 10.
24. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paladin, 1973.
25. On stereotypes of black men in pop culture (music, film, entertainment and sport) see Isaac Julien, 'The Other Look', unpublished BA dissertation, St Martin's School of Art, 1983.
26. Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp' in *Against Interpretation*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969.

27. Jerry Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: the Story of Soul* (London, Pan, 1984).
28. Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice' in Stephen Heath (ed.), *Image–Music–Text* (London: Fontana, 1977).